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Success in Breaking Child Abuse Chain Reported Poverty-Level Mothers Taught to Discipline Youngsters Without Violence

By LOIS TIMNICK, Times Human Behavior Writer

Short courses in "parenting" can nip child abuse in the bud, according to the director of a program that recently offered such instruction to poverty-level mothers in Los Angeles.

Kerby T. Alvy, a psychologist who directs the Center for the Improvement of Child Caring in Studio City, said he and his colleagues wanted to find out whether, by teaching techniques of discipline that avoid the use of physical force or verbal abuse, they could interrupt the chain of violence that starts with lost tempers and spankings and often escalates into harmful child abuse that is passed from generation to generation.

The answer is yes, they say. The mothers who took the courses reduced their use of force on their children by half. Only 35% of those who completed the classes said they still handle major disobedience with physical force, compared with 64% of those in a control group that received little or no instruction.

Those who used to beat their children when they misbehaved say they now talk and use other methods of discipline, Alvy said. The mothers said their relationships with their children have improved.

The center gave the 10- and 15-week courses to more than 50 poor black and Latino parents in South-Central and Central Los Angeles. Only one father participated. The study was supported by funds from the National Institute of Mental Health, Matiel and Northrup corporations and the California Community Foundation.

All the parents had pre-school children enrolled in a Head Start program. An equal number of parents were used as controls and either received little or no training or simply met to sew or make crafts.

Poverty-level parents were chosen because more than 60% of those reported for child abuse in California live at or below the poverty level, which is an annual income of \$8,700 for an urban family of four.

"I used a belt and yelled a lot," admitted Beverly Jones, 32, the divorced mother of four children, aged 4 to 12. That was the only thing she knew to do, she said, having had her share of whippings, being looked up in closets and having her fingernails taped as a child.

Now, she said, she relies more on "mild social punishments" (disapproving statements calmly delivered) and a technique known as "time-out."

"When my 4-year-old misbehaves, she gets a 'time-out.' That means," Jones explained, "that she has to sit in a chair facing the wall in a room by herself for two minutes. I explain why she's there and that the time-out starts when she calms down."

"You can't believe what a change that two minutes can make."

She labeled her previous relationship with her children "strained."

"I didn't understand them, that they had feelings. I mean I thought they were kids—"you sit down and shut up." Now we are more open, and I explain why they're being punished. It's so much better."

Another mother who met with reporters Wednesday was Ruth Hill, 23, who is rearing a 7-year-old and a 4-year-old by herself. She now substitutes similar measures for spanking and yelling.

Both mothers were part of a course in "confident parenting," which stresses praising, mild social punishments, systematic ignoring of disruptive behavior, incentive systems for specific behaviors, and time-outs.

This method, Alvy said, proved more effective than another more complicated system used in some of the groups, known as "parent effectiveness training" (PET).

PET stresses parent-child communication and consists of such

techniques as "I messages" ("When you throw this rock at your brother it makes me frightened because I think you're going to hurt him" rather than "You're a lousy kid for doing that"), "active listening" ("It seems you're upset," says mother to child when he comes in from school and throws his books at the wall) and "no-lose conflict resolution," which involves the child in coming up with solutions to problems.

Alvy said future courses will concentrate on the "confident parenting" approach, because many of the parents involved are both young and uneducated. Fifty-five percent of the black parents and 34% of the Latinos were teen-agers when they first became parents. Sixty percent of the blacks and 18% of the Latinos were single parents. The average level of formal education was 11.9 years for the black parents, 7.6 for the Latinos. Ninety-four percent of the Latino mothers spoke no English.

Alvy said the training costs about \$100 per parent, (participants in the study received it free). This means it would cost more than \$2 million to train the 25,000 families reported for child abuse each year in Los Angeles County. The actual incidence of child abuse is thought to be four times higher, he said.